

NEWS BRIEFING

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ARTHUR SYLVESTER

The Pentagon

October 25, 1962

5:15 P.M.

MR. SYLVESTER: Gentlemen, I have a little positive information. May I try first to clear up one point, or clue you in on one point.

On the question of the encounter this morning, which we reported to you shortly after 11 o'clock, we have been asked since then, was there a boarding? There was no boarding. The tanker had been under surveillance for an extended period. Furthermore, the attitude of the tanker in the water with its low freeboard, which my Navy leaders tell me means that it was floating low in the water, told the Commander of the Navy ship that it was a tanker heavily loaded. If the tanker had had hatches or any unusual configuration -- unusually large hatches -- this would have aroused suspicions. It had none of these and the Navy Commander and the Navy were completely satisfied that it was an ordinary oil tanker.

There have been some questions raised, and we have had inquiries of a technical nature, as to whether the Presidential proclamation included a prohibition, or in its prohibition on missiles and offensive weapons, included as well missile propellants and chemical compounds capable of being used to power missiles, as well as surface-to-surface missiles. The answer is yes, the proclamation does include a prohibition on this type of material, and, therefore, if there is any sighting of a tanker, which I am told would show a special configuration with this sort of material, it would be stopped.

QUESTION: Would you repeat the last sentence that you said? After prohibition on missile propellants. There is a prohibition on missile propellants?

MR. SYLVESTER: The prohibition on missiles includes with it a prohibition on the propellant and chemical compounds capable of being used to power these missiles as well as on surface-to-surface missiles.

Mr. Salinger at the present time is making an announcement as to the President's reply to Mr. U Thant's proposal and Mr. Khrushchev's response to that. I will not get into that, obviously. He will say, and I will give you this so that you will know the impact of that on the operation, he will point out that despite the exchanges going on, the quarantine continues, naturally. Soviet ships are continuing to Cuba, as we have said. There is no way of knowing what is in them, and furthermore, as the Secretary has said and the pictures show, the missile site work at Cuba is going on at the same rate. So that, as you evaluate or look at what is being said on the diplomatic front, keep in mind these three factors which we are calling to your attention and Mr. Salinger is making clear at the White House.

QUESTION: Does that mean that the missile construction is still going on, that the later reconnaissance flights showed?

MR. SYLVESTER: Correct.

QUESTION: Have you been taking pictures in the last day?

MR. SYLVESTER: I didn't hear the question.

QUESTION: Have you been taking pictures of the missile sites in the last day?

MR. SYLVESTER: There has been constant surveillance.

QUESTION: Are we going to get any more pictures?

MR. SYLVESTER: I don't want to predict. We gave you the latest ones yesterday.

QUESTION: What are these three points that we are supposed to keep in mind? I didn't follow that. I only have two.

MR. SYLVESTER: That the quarantine will continue regardless of this discussion.

QUESTION: Can you give us any general idea how many ships are still continuing?

MR. SYLVESTER: Did you get the rest?

QUESTION: Soviet ships are continuing to Cuba and that the missile construction is continuing, is that right?

MR. SYLVESTER: Yes.

QUESTION: How many ships, the quarantine continues, naturally.

MR. SYLVESTER: The question was, Warren Rogers said that he did not get the answer to my offering, that he should keep in mind in the diplomatic negotiations our aspects of them. I am not commenting on the diplomatic discussions in any way. I am simply saying that as they continue, in whatever form or response at this time, insofar as I know, the quarantine continues, naturally.

The Soviet ships are continuing to Cuba. We have no way of knowing what is in them. Obviously, the quarantine alone will establish that.

Furthermore, on Cuba itself the missile site work is progressing at the same rapid rate and you will recall that the President in his proclamation said that the ultimate objective was the removal of those missile sites.

QUESTION: If we don't know what is in the ships that are progressing to Cuba, why were we so sure that this was fuel oil or whatever it was, and not missile fuel?

MR. SYLVESTER: My understanding of that is that a ship carrying the propellant or missile fuel requires a special configuration which would be identified by Naval people who know these matters.

QUESTION: Was there an actual exchange of signals between these ships? Did they exchange messages with the Soviet Commander?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't get into the details of it.

QUESTION: There was a wire service report that said that this was true. Maybe that is why the question was asked.

QUESTION: Can we say anything about the ship configuration you were talking about earlier? What is the unusual configuration of a tanker or other vessel that carries missile propellants or fuel?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't respond to the question. I don't know. I'll try to get the answer.

QUESTION: Do you know what the hatches that would have been on a ship that was not carrying -- what do they mean by the term "hatches"?

QUESTION: Does this morning's episode indicate that we won't board unless absolutely necessary?

MR. SYLVESTER: It doesn't indicate anything of the sort. We will take whatever measures, as the Secretary said, are necessary to establish and maintain the quarantine.

QUESTION: Have there been any other encounters?

MR. SYLVESTER: No.

QUESTION: How many ships are on their way at this point?

MR. SYLVESTER: There are 2,000 ships daily, regularly, at any time in the Atlantic, and I can't answer the question.

QUESTION: How many of the 25 are there?

QUESTION: The Secretary said the other evening there were 25.

QUESTION: How many of the 25 are still underway? Presumably one is, because it has been cleared through.

MR. SYLVESTER: I would not be bound at this point, if I were you, by any specific number. We said this morning at least --

QUESTION: Twelve have been turned back?

MR. SYLVESTER: Have turned back. Whether the others have altered course or are exactly on the same course I can't answer at this time. But there are Soviet ships continuing toward Cuba.

QUESTION: What is the name of the American ship that was in the encounter?

MR. SYLVESTER: I haven't got the name of it to release at this time.

QUESTION: There is a report that the Moscow radio or press identified its tanker as the BUCHAREST. Was that the tanker we stopped?

MR. SYLVESTER: I will try to find out the name for you.

QUESTION: You say the ships are continuing and the missile construction is continuing. The other day the President and the Secretary both said that if this build-up continued, further action would be taken. Are you trying to tell us now you are about to take this further action?

MR. SYLVESTER: No, I am not trying to tell you anything.

QUESTION: Senator Kuchel on the West Coast apparently thinks some further action is imminent in the way of invasion and pinpoint bombing of Cuba, and so forth. Can you give us any denial of this?

MR. SYLVESTER: I would not have any comment on that whatsoever.

QUESTION: Did you have any more to tell us before this questioning started?

MR. SYLVESTER: No, sir.

QUESTION: Did the tanker stop? The Soviet tanker?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't tell you whether it came to a dead stop or not.

QUESTION: Did it slow down?

MR. SYLVESTER: Obviously, it wasn't going at top speed, I take it.

QUESTION: Before, or did it decrease speed?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't tell you. I don't know.

MORE

QUESTION: Can you say anything about when the next contact might be expected?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't tell you in point of time.

QUESTION: When is our next meeting?

QUESTION: Is there any evidence of new equipment on the missile sites?

MR. SYLVESTER: The latest pictures we had were yesterday. If you noticed, they were pretty clear showing that the work was going along. What we are saying is that there is not any slackening of the development of these sites whatsoever.

QUESTION: How much time does Castro have to remove these missiles?

MR. SYLVESTER: The sooner the better, I should think.

QUESTION: Are there ships approaching which don't have this innocent configuration and presumably have to be boarded and searched?

MR. SYLVESTER: The quarantine is being imposed by the Navy and carried out by the officers in charge of these ships to make sure that nothing is passing through. If they see anything they feel should be investigated, it will.

QUESTION: Are there ships approaching you expect would have to be investigated?

MR. SYLVESTER: I wouldn't doubt it.

QUESTION: The impression created at Monday's briefing is that any ship of any flag headed toward Cuba, would be hailed, halted, and searched. This tanker goes through without being halted and searched.

MR. SYLVESTER: No, I think --

QUESTION: Did we get the wrong impression or have you pulled back from the original intention?

MR. SYLVESTER: I don't think you got the wrong impression. I don't think we pulled back. I think if you look at the record, what was said, there is a special list of contraband, or a special list of goods, which will be diverted. On the least suspicion that any ship is carrying that, action will be taken to divert it. Obviously the first interest, and the ships which would have capacity and be most likely to carry the material on the list, would be bloc ships. Therefore, you would be looking at them first. Obviously if there is any indication that other ships are carrying this sort of material, they will be halted. Naturally we are going to concentrate on them.

QUESTION: It was stated that you were going to examine the manifest of the ship. This is what was said Monday night.

MR. SYLVESTER: It was said if it was boarded you could look at the manifest.

QUESTION: It was also said they would be boarded.

QUESTION: When will --

MR. SYLVESTER: It was pointed out that oil was not one of those.

QUESTION: I understand that.

QUESTION: When may newsmen be permitted to go out there?

MR. SYLVESTER: I would expect not too long.

QUESTION: What do you mean by not too long?

MR. SYLVESTER: We are working right now on

the provisions how we can get people out there, how many you can get, which one of you are going to go and which are not, and how you are going to decide who is going and who is not. I would assume that every newsman from any media around the country would want to go. The question is how you handle two or three hundred or twenty or one or two is a problem. After you get there we have to make provisions. There is no point of being out there, as I take it, unless you get your report back. The problem of getting your report back is one of the things that I am addressing myself to completely in this. As I understand it I would not want to be out there writing to myself or talking to myself. If you are bobbing around out there, that's a problem. We are going to work the problem out.

QUESTION: Is this liable to be ready during the weekend?

MR. SYLVESTER: I would hope it would be ready and we will have our plans battened down so we can go whenever we are ready to go before the weekend. Howard, what I am trying to do is to prepare so that we can handle under various categories, various groups, various arrangements, just as soon as possible, not waiting until we are ready to put you out there. When that time comes, and everything is in order, you can go.

QUESTION: Would the foreign press go, too?

MR. SYLVESTER: That is one of the problems we have.

QUESTION: Have any non-bloc ships come through?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not aware of any.

QUESTION: Then there is just the one ship that has come through since this thing started?

MR. SYLVESTER: So far as I know.

QUESTION: Isn't there any Soviet cargo ship other than the tanker going to have to be boarded and searched?

MR. SYLVESTER: I would expect so.

QUESTION: There are other Soviet cargo ships approaching?

MR. SYLVESTER: Yes.

QUESTION: And they will be boarded and searched?

QUESTION: Are we expecting a contact with a non-bloc ship around now?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not sure. I am not out there.

QUESTION: There is a report to that effect. Is that right?

MR. SYLVESTER: There is a report to that effect?

QUESTION: There is a report to that effect.

MR. SYLVESTER: What is the report?

QUESTION: That is why I asked you. The report is that we are expecting a contact with a non-bloc ship very soon.

MR. SYLVESTER: I am very interested. I have no comment on it.

QUESTION: Is this the first you heard on it?

MR. SYLVESTER: I have no comment on it.

QUESTION: When do you expect to be able to give us the briefing asked about four days ago on your blockade and boarding procedures?

MR. SYLVESTER: We are still working on it.

QUESTION: Would the Pentagon concede that offensive weapons could have been concealed on that tanker and gotten through?

MR. SYLVESTER: No. I am satisfied that the Navy is satisfied.

QUESTION: Is the Navy satisfied?

MR. SYLVESTER: The Navy is satisfied. If you think back this ship obviously left its home port before the proclamation of the quarantine. Up to this time the Russians as you know, because we have given out pictures, have had no hesitancy of shipping this stuff in the open. They haven't shown any indication that they had to rip up their submarines or tankers or rip up any other ship. They have had it out in the open. We have passed out pictures showing it. I would see no reason to suppose that before this action was taken, and the fact that this ship left before that, there would be any need for them to go to that extreme.

QUESTION: If you were going out there would you wear summer or winter clothing?

QUESTION: As of what time is your information based that the missile sites were worked on?

MR. SYLVESTER: What time?

My information is based on within the last twenty minutes.

QUESTION: When did they get their last report?

MR. SYLVESTER: You will recall we are not saying or discussing how we get our intelligence, when we get it and so forth.

QUESTION: You just said that we will recall that this ship left before the quarantine and that they have been shipping in the open. How long have you

known they were shipping missiles to Cuba in the open?

MR. SYLVESTER: I would have to look at the pictures. You have had some pictures of that.

QUESTION: They don't have any dates on them.

MR. SYLVESTER: You will have to find out what the dates are.

QUESTION: What you say implies that you have known that these missiles were going to Cuba long before Monday night, October 15th, at ten p.m.

MR. SYLVESTER: It doesn't imply anything of the sort.

QUESTION: You said they were shipping them in the open.

MR. SYLVESTER: That is what I did.

QUESTION: Prior to that time?

MR. SYLVESTER: Prior to Monday?

QUESTION: Yes.

QUESTION: Why didn't you see them if the intelligence surveillance is supposed to be so good?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am talking about the crates of IL-28's. They were followed.

QUESTION: You have known about the IL-28's a long time?

MR. SYLVESTER: I didn't say a long time, no.

QUESTION: You said they were doing it in the open.

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not going to discuss how long.

QUESTION: You did discuss it.

MR. SYLVESTER: No. I am not going to discuss intelligence information. What I said in answer to the question can we say for sure that there was not something else than oil in the tanker. I said that it appears to us: one, that that tanker had left before the proclamation; and two, that we have released pictures within the last number of days showing IL-28 crates. That is what I said. No more or less.

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QUESTION: What is the point of the release of the picture unless you were suggesting that those crates were shipped before the time you are talking about?

MR. SYLVESTER: I haven't any further comment on it.

QUESTION: There have been reports that 35 Cuban refugees from Guantanamo have landed in Miami. Is this so, and if it is so, are these the only ones who have sought asylum?

MR. SYLVESTER: Let me check that out. I haven't any knowledge of that fact, but we ought to be able to establish it.

QUESTION: Where are the dozen or so ships heading that were to change course yesterday?

MR. SYLVESTER: Where are they heading now? I don't have any idea personally. As long as they are not going to Cuba, our interest is not there.

QUESTION: Do they have enough fuel to get them back?

MR. SYLVESTER: I don't know. That is their problem.

QUESTION: What determines the turnback point?

QUESTION: How do you know that they have, in fact, turned back?

QUESTION: Are they kept under surveillance?

MR. SYLVESTER: You mean after they have gone the other way?

QUESTION: Yes.

MR. SYLVESTER: Do we follow each one if they are going the other way? Is that your question?

QUESTION: For a reasonable length of time?

QUESTION: Are there any indications that any new

Russian ships other than those discussed by Secretary McNamara have left Russian ports and moved into the area?

MR. SYLVESTER: I couldn't discuss it one way or another.

QUESTION: Can we have an answer about how far we follow them after they turn around?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not going to tell you how far we follow them or what procedures. The Navy is satisfied when it reports that they have changed course. If you will recall, yesterday we gave a tentative report on the basis of the information that they changed course. Today we have said, and are satisfied that they definitely have turned back.

QUESTION: You mean they headed back to Russia?

MR. SYLVESTER: I haven't any idea. They are not going to Cuba.

QUESTION: Have you had any contacts with unidentified submarines?

MR. SYLVESTER: No, not that I know of.

QUESTION: Are there any more plans for Congressional briefings?

MR. SYLVESTER: I have none and had none.

QUESTION: Is it possible that these 12 ships have turned back to rendezvous for a convoy operation? Are there any signs of Soviet warships heading toward this area or perhaps Soviet submarines surfaced, heading toward these 12 ships? Are they in a group, in other words, and are they forming a convoy?

MR. SYLVESTER: I have no information on that.

QUESTION: You said that missile installation work is proceeding in Cuba. Did you refer to the IRBM's or the mobile small ones?

MR. SYLVESTER: We are talking about the offensive missile sites that we have already revealed.

QUESTION: You are referring to both?

MR. SYLVESTER: If you recall, the first pictures we released showed that the start on the IRBM's had not gone down the lane. They havenot stopped going down the lane.

QUESTION: Work is proceeding on both?

MR. SYLVESTER: Precisely.

QUESTION: Were any special orders issued from the Pentagon with respect to dealing with this tanker?

MR. SYLVESTER: This particular tanker?

QUESTION: Yes.

MR. SYLVESTER: I think not. I think these are part of the orders all the Commanders have.

QUESTION: Did the Commander know in advance, or could he tell from the superstructure that it was not likely to be carrying offensive material and didn't have to board?

MR. SYLVESTER: I don't get your question.

QUESTION: Was the Commander told in advance that he should make a judgment about what the thing looks like?

MR. SYLVESTER: All of the Commanders have been issued orders which cover all these possibilities.

QUESTION: Can you tell us whether this Skipper did anything but look at the freeboard? Did he talk to the Skipper of the Russian ship by radio?

MR. SYLVESTER: There was an exchange.

QUESTION: Between the Skippers?

MR. SYLVESTER: I can't go any further than that.

QUESTION: Was it by radio?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not going to discuss what it was.

QUESTION: Representative Anfuso said it was by radio. Could you comment on what he said?

MR. SYLVESTER: I wouldn't think of it.

QUESTION: He is talking about a defense problem here and you are the spokesman.

MR. SYLVESTER: I am not going to discuss what a Congressman said.

QUESTION: There is a report that this was by radio?

MR. SYLVESTER: I have no comment on it. I am not prepared to talk about what the discussion was or what the exchange was.

QUESTION: Since this thing began there have been a number of stories from many different places. Aside from Secretary McNamara's 25 ships, not one of them has come from the Pentagon. They have come from the White House, State Department, Puerto Rico, New York, Van Zandt, Anfuso and elsewhere.

We were promised all of the information would channel through here. We haven't had a story yet since McNamara said there were 25 ships. All of the stuff you have given us here has been on the wires for a long time. Are we ever going to get a story here?

QUESTION: Are we going to continue to have after the fact cover ups for Congressmen that talk first, or are we going to have some hard news? That is what we are trying to ask, I think.

MR. SYLVESTER: I would hope we continue to have hard news.

QUESTION: Can you explain the security behind this? Is there something secure about whether it is by radio?

MR. SYLVESTER: I am sorry I can't contribute any more.

QUESTION: How close did the ships pass each other?

MR. SYLVESTER: They were reasonably close.

QUESTION: Within a mile?

MR. SYLVESTER: Again I am not going to get into the details.

QUESTION: Reasonably close?

MR. SYLVESTER: I actually got into much more detail than I am supposed to. I am going to leave it at that.

QUESTION: You say you can't name the ship?

MR. SYLVESTER: Bucharest.

QUESTION: The U. S. Naval vessel?

MR. SYLVESTER: I haven't got the name.

QUESTION: Can you give us the type of the vessel? Destroyer, cruiser, aircraft?

MR. SYLVESTER: Not at this time.

QUESTION: You said it was a commander that was in charge of that ship?

MR. SYLVESTER: I meant in in the generic term.

QUESTION: You didn't mean it as a rank.

MR. SYLVESTER: I didn't mean it as a rank.

QUESTION: Why did it take four hours after the confrontation for you to tell us? What was the delay?

MR. SYLVESTER: I refer to Mr. Salinger's comments this morning on this. We are in a pretty serious situation here. First off, you have to authenticate it. There are other considerations than simply popping it out the minute it comes. These are all considerations which were taken into account.

I have told you all I can tell you.

THE PRESS: Thank you.